



File Code: 1950; 2400
Date: July 14, 2021

Dear Interested Party:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). I request your input on the following proposed action regarding the Carter Mountain Project. Your comments will be used to analyze any potential issues that would arise from the implementation of this project.

Project Location and Background

The project area is located in parts of T6N-7N, R22W-23W, in Logan and Yell Counties, Arkansas, approximately three miles south of New Blaine. The 11,784-acre project area contains 9,997 acres of National Forest System lands. The majority of the project area falls in the High Quality Forest Products (3.E) Management Area from the 2005 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan). This management area places emphasis on managing the land to produce valuable, high-quality sawtimber, while selecting management activities that maintain appropriate conditions for wildlife, soil productivity, water quality, recreation, and scenic beauty. The last entry into this project area was 1997.

Purpose of the Action

The purpose of this action is to promote the health and vigor of the project area by providing for a diversity of plant and animal communities, creating early seral habitat, reducing fuel accumulation, and producing a sustainable yield of wood products. Overall guidance for this action is found in the Revised Forest Plan.

Need for the Action

A team of interdisciplinary specialists have met, and these are the needs found in the project area:

The forested areas have over-stocked stands. Over-stocked conditions within timber stands create stressed and suppressed forest conditions. These conditions make the timber stands more susceptible to harm from insects and disease and will eventually lead to density dependent mortality in both the overstory and midstory cohorts. The desired condition is to have forests that are relatively resistant to major outbreaks of insects and disease that cause widespread tree mortality. Thinning trees will reduce the stress, making for a healthier forest. In addition, pine boring beetles and pine bark beetles can attack and overwhelm unhealthy stressed pine forests. A southern pine beetle epidemic is currently occurring in Mississippi. Once insect infestations start, it is too late to effectively treat large areas and many acres of trees rapidly die. Prevention by thinning stands to reduce competition and relieve moisture stress is the control method of choice. By keeping the trees healthy, beetles are often exuded from the trees by pitch and are less likely to reach epidemic proportions. Upland hardwood trees are also susceptible to many insects and diseases. The annual combined loss due to insects and diseases is often more than the losses to



forest fires. Most losses can be avoided through proper forest management. Maintaining healthy stands by promoting tree vigor helps to avoid these losses.

Much of the project area has a thick midstory and overgrown understory. Midstory and understory control, using both herbicide and prescribed fire, is needed to further reduce stand densities, provide increased light to the forest floor, and further reduce competition for limited available water and nutrients. The desired condition is to have a well-developed herbaceous understory and a fairly open midstory.

There are a few stands within the project area that are overly mature and in need of regeneration. Overly mature stands are more susceptible to damage from insect and disease. Furthermore, regenerating these stands will provide much needed early seral habitat for wildlife species and help to balance the overall age-class distribution across the project area. The desired future condition for major vegetative communities and for wildlife is to have a relatively balanced age-class distribution.

Some stands of the Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest community type have failed regeneration in which enough seedlings did not live to re-establish the stands as a forest. These stands failed because the necessary silvicultural prescription of pre-commercial thinning was never proposed and implemented. The desired condition is to have these stands properly stocked with 500-700 trees per acre of the Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest community type following the third year after planting or harvesting. The current overstory trees are of an age that provides reduced seed production for natural regeneration. The stand needs to be in an open condition to provide enough light for seedlings to properly stock the stand. Thus, in order to re-establish these poorly stocked stands, they need to be harvested and planted. There are some stands that were severely damaged by tornado in the past and need to be regenerated.

Limited access to those stands in need of silvicultural treatment cause need for temporary road construction. Some existing roads are unsafe or not useable, creating the need for road reconstruction. There are other roads that are no longer needed, or overgrown and unlocatable, that need to be removed from the road systems.

There is a lack of high-quality forage and habitat for species requiring early successional habitat as well as a lack of static water sources for amphibians and other aquatic species.

Proposed Action

To improve the conditions described above, the Forest Service proposes to implement the following management activities. All acres are approximate, and no activities are planned on private land (prescribed burning could be done on private land with agreement from the landowner):

Pine/Hardwood thinning followed by timber stand improvement (TSI) – Commercial thinning is proposed on 5,547 acres. The stands would be thinned to a target basal area (BA) of 60-70 ft²/acre. Trees that are suppressed or that have poor form would be removed. Trees of good form and/or close to the correct spacing would be favored over trees that are simply of larger size. The target spacing would depend on the average diameter of the trees in the stand.

TSI treatments of the midstory using herbicide and/or hand tools may be utilized to further reduce competition of the remaining trees.

Pine shelterwood followed by TSI – Pine shelterwood harvest is proposed on approximately 760 acres. This type of regeneration harvest would retain 20-30% of the overstory (BA of 30 ft²/acre). Site preparation would be done with herbicide treatments and with a prescribed burn to prepare a proper seed bed. Adequate natural regeneration should be present to re-stock the stands with an average 300 trees/acre; however, planting may be necessary if stocking levels are not met through natural means. Following the establishment of the regenerated stand, release treatments with herbicide may be needed to promote “free-to-grow” conditions. The remaining mature overstory trees would be harvested when the new stand is certified adequately stocked with seedling/saplings and the overstory trees are no longer needed to provide regeneration.

Seed tree removal – Seed tree removal harvest is proposed on approximately 775 acres. This harvest involves the removal of all overstory seed trees left to provide seed stock from previous seed tree/shelterwood timber harvest. Seed tree removal would occur once stands have been certified as adequately stocked with seedling/saplings and the overstory trees are no longer needed to provide regeneration.

Clearcut – Clearcut harvest is proposed on approximately 152 acres, made up of 3 separate units, with the largest opening being about 65 acres. All trees of commercial size would be removed during harvest to provide the maximum amount of sunlight to reach the forest floor to facilitate regeneration. Site preparation would be done with herbicide treatments and with a prescribed burn to prepare a proper seed bed. Adequate natural regeneration should be present to re-stock the stands with an average 300 trees/acre; however, planting may be necessary if stocking levels are not met through natural means. Following the establishment of the regenerated stand, release treatments with herbicide may be needed to promote “free-to-grow” conditions.

Wildlife opening restoration – Forty-three (43) existing wildlife openings are proposed for restoration. Routine restoration would be performed by brush hogging the openings followed by a chemical treatment with imazapyr, imazapic, triclopyr amine, and/or glyphosate, if needed, to eradicate non-native species and woody species. Each opening would be evaluated before treatment to determine which chemical(s) would be used. Chemical application would occur between March and October using a tractor-mounted sprayer. This would be followed by liming, disking, and planting seed suitable for wildlife on each opening. These openings are proposed for multiple restoration treatments on an approximate 2-year interval dependent upon funding.

Wildlife opening enlargement – Three (3) openings are proposed to be enlarged: S017, S004, S006. A bulldozer would be used to enlarge the footprint and/or push out large brush/rock piles in the center of these openings to provide additional space for planting seed suitable for wildlife. After enlargement, these would be maintained as the ones in the previous action (Wildlife opening restoration)

Wildlife pond construction – One (1) pond would be constructed within the S106 wildlife opening. Along with the construction of the pond, S106 would receive the restoration activities outlined in Wildlife opening restoration

Wildlife stand improvement (WSI) – WSI would be completed on 120 acres by using a combination of fire, chainsaws, and/or herbicides to remove suppressed and intermediate trees. By reducing the midstory, it will allow more light to filter throughout the forest canopy and spur the growth of understory vegetation. All Eastern red cedar, merchantable and non-merchantable, would be cut but would not be treated with chemical within the entire Carter Mountain Project area.

Riparian stand improvement (RSI) – RSI would be completed within 100 feet on either side of the Chickalah Creek corridor within the project area. This riparian area would be cut to a BA of between 60 to 80 with most areas closer to 60. Trees would be cut and left on the flood plain to improve riparian conditions. Some trees may be placed in the stream channel to increase the large woody component.

Fuel reduction/ecosystem prescribed burning – Prescribed burning is proposed on 8,584 acres. Burns would occur on a 3 to 7-year rotation in both the dormant and growing seasons. Burn blocks would not exceed 1,000 acres, excluding the area surrounding Carter Mountain specifically. A slow, backing, multi-day burn is proposed for Carter Mountain and could be up to 2,200 acres. In an effort to protect turkeys, burns over 300 acres would not take place during nesting season, from April 1st - July 1st. Burn blocks adjacent to one another would be burned on different rotations to provide edge and habitat diversity for wildlife.

Fire line reconstruction – Brush and ground vegetation would be removed from 13.5 miles of existing fire lines by blading using a bulldozer. After the burns are completed, these fire lines would be waterbarred and seeded with native grasses and forbs where needed to restore vegetative cover to the exposed soil.

Fire line construction – Twenty-two (22) miles of new fire line would be bladed to bare minimum soil using a bulldozer, removing ground vegetation and small trees. The fire line would meander around large trees, leaving them in place. After the burns are completed, these fire lines would be waterbarred and seeded with native grasses and forbs where needed to restore vegetative cover to the exposed soil.

System road decommission – 2.25 miles of road would be decommissioned by re-establishing vegetation and drainage patterns, stabilizing slopes, blocking road entrance, installing water bars, removing culverts, scattering slash, and eliminating the roadbed.

System road reconstruction – 13.2 miles of road improvements or realignment would result in an increase of an existing road's traffic service level, expanding its capacity, changing its original design function, or relocating an existing road or portions of an existing road and treatment of the old roadway.

Pre-haul road maintenance – Fourteen (14) miles of pre-haul maintenance would be required prior to timber hauling. Activities include brush removal, spot gravel, surface protection, blading, culvert replacement, and drainage reconditioning as necessary to restore the road to its original design function.

Temporary road construction – Temporary road construction is necessary to access harvest areas. Per Revised Forest Plan design criteria, temporary roads would be decommissioned, revegetated, and re-contoured upon termination of management activity. After harvest, these roads would be closed with earthen berms or gates, fertilized, seeded, planted with native warm and cool season grasses and nonpersistent cultivars, and utilized as temporary wildlife openings.

Invitation to Participate in Project Planning

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time; we will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. With that said, your comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. They will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation, and alternative ways to meet Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess concerns of the public.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become a part of the public record for this Proposed Action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Objection Process

This project is subject to subparts A and B of *36 CFR Part 218 Project-Level Predecisional Administrative Review Process* (objection process); it is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA).

The designated opportunity for public comment in response to this solicitation is **July 16, 2021** to **August 16, 2021**. Providing specific written comments during this time will afford you standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire (see Upcoming Project Planning Steps).

Pursuant to §218.2, specific written comments should be within the scope of the Proposed Action, have a direct relationship to the Proposed Action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.

How to Comment

Specific written comments must be submitted to: Clark Reames, Dep. District Ranger, 3001 E Walnut, Paris, AR 72855 or fax to 479-963-8055. Send electronic comments, in a common digital format, to comments-southern-ozark-stfrancis-mtmagazine@usda.gov. Please state “Carter Mountain Project” in the email subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

Upcoming Project Planning Steps

As stated above, your comments will help us identify issues and they will be used to formulate alternatives to this proposal. An environmental analysis will be conducted, and the results will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA).

Upon completion, the EA will be released for public review and comment. A 30-day notice and comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 218 will be initiated. This comment period will afford you another opportunity to obtain standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the project and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please contact Chip Stokes at 479-963-3076 or Charles.Stokes@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

J. "Clark" Reames

JOHN C. REAMES
Deputy District Ranger

Enclosures